

Discourses on employability in higher education and perceptions of the labour market among undergraduates in France

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Research Domains

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Abstract

The massification of higher education in France has raised a number of questions about the transition of students to the labour market, leading to a series of reforms, in particular the vocationalisation of undergraduate courses. These reforms aim to equip students with professional skills and help them enter the labour market. The aim of this presentation is to analyse how these trends and the underlying discourse on employability influence students' perceptions of the labour market and their use of resources during their academic careers. Using a qualitative survey conducted in a French university, the study shows that undergraduates mainly adopt an individualised view of employability, focusing on the personal qualities needed to succeed in a competitive job market. However, it also highlights that students' perceptions are shaped by their disciplinary background, but also by their social and academic environment, as well as their early experiences of the labour market.

Full paper

Since the Bologna process, the contribution of higher education to student employability has been reaffirmed at every European summit. The concept of employability promoted by current policies is part of the promotion of the knowledge economy, with higher education expected to produce 'knowledge workers' (Brown et al., 2003). Faced with high unemployment, young people need to invest in their human capital, in the development of their skills, which they can then use on the labour market (Tran et al., 2020). This concept has been the subject of much criticism in the literature, both in France (Tiffon et al., 2017) and in other countries (Brown et al., 2003; Tomlinson, 2007), particularly because it places the responsibility for employability solely on students, who are expected to be the 'actors' in their academic careers. Graduates seem to increasingly subscribe to this narrative of individualisation, minimising the role of discrimination linked to age, gender or social origin in access to the labour market (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Tomlinson, 2007).

However, while a common trend has been observed within countries, the way in which these European initiatives have been integrated into university policies varies from one country to another (Brooks, 2021). In France, employability is clearly mentioned in the various reports on higher education from the 2000s onwards (Soldano, 2018), and a shift towards the vocationalisation of universities has taken shape. This movement is part of a particular context in the history of higher education and the relationship between training and employment systems. On the one hand, French higher education is

characterised by a strong hierarchy and segmentation of the various courses (Verley & Zilloniz, 2010). On the other hand, since the economic policies of the 1960s and 1970s, France has adopted what is known as an 'adequationist approach', with the aim of bringing the specialisation of the degree closer to the targeted field of employment. Moreover, while all areas of higher education are affected by this vocational drift, the emphasis is on undergraduate studies.

The aim of this article is to gain a better understanding of how the development of experience with the professional world and the underlying discourse of employability, as well as the promotion of the 'economy of experience' are likely to influence students' perceptions of the labour market and the way in which they mobilise or construct certain resources during their university career. The aim is to understand how their perceptions are constructed around students' social and cultural resources, their career path and their first experiences of the labour market. It will also be structured by the dynamics of the vocationalisation of disciplines.

Using a qualitative survey conducted at a French university, we show that individualised discourse on employability appears to be widespread among undergraduates. As in studies conducted in other countries (Bathmaker et al., 2013), students tend to consider that the labour market is competitive and that the 'rules of the game' have changed. They therefore emphasise individual qualities and the importance of 'standing out' in order to develop their employability. Nevertheless, students will develop a differentiated representation of the labour market, particularly through the structuring role of disciplines. The type of knowledge developed within disciplines and the form of regulation at the entrance to the labour market (Stavrou, 2022) will therefore influence students' perceptions of the labour market. Within the same course of study, students' perceptions of the labour market will be shaped differently by their economic, cultural and social resources. Educational capital also appears to be a decisive factor, which has not been much discussed in studies conducted in other countries, and which may be explained by the 'hold of the educational meritocracy' in France (Duru-Bellat & Tenret, 2009).

The results of this research contribute to the debates on the development of students' employability during their studies in higher education. The current discourse on employability refers to the acquisition of a set of professional and cross-disciplinary skills as part of an 'individualised' pathway. This discourse does not take into account the way in which students' social resources, financial conditions and educational trajectories will structure their perception of the labour market and the "construction" of their academic career, thereby reproducing social and educational inequalities.

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